



## MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

# News Release

For Immediate Release: 7/2/2012

### Office of Consumer Protection Advises Homeowners to Use Only Licensed Contractors for Home Rep

The Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) warns county residents to be cautious when hiring contractors to repair damage caused by last week's severe storm and advises consumers to do their homework before signing a contract for any home repair or improvement, or tree service work.

"Storm devastation can strike twice if consumers are later victimized by unscrupulous contractors," said OCP Director Eric Friedman. "Unfortunately, unlicensed contractors frequently follow in the path of storm damage seeking to exploit the misfortune of residents."

The Office of Consumer Protection offers the following advice to homeowners:

- Do not panic and hire someone because they are the only company that can come out to the house right away. Make sure the home improvement contractor is licensed with the Maryland Home Improvement Commission (MHIC) by calling 410-230-6309 or check online. Also, make sure the contractor is familiar with and has expertise in repairing the type of damage that your house has sustained, such as roofing or foundation repair.
- For tree service or removal, check to see if the business is a licensed tree expert with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Forestry Division at 410-260-8521 or online at [www.dnr.maryland.gov](http://www.dnr.maryland.gov). If a licensed company is used, there is a complaint process through the Department of Natural Resources. If an unlicensed company is used, it is often impossible to track down the company, particularly if they have been paid in advance. In addition, consumers should ask to see written verification of the company's insurance and workers compensation coverage.
- Get estimates from three contractors. Some fraudulent contractors will capitalize on the situation and overcharge consumers or lead them to believe the damage is worse than it really is. State law requires a written contract for any work completed. A home improvement contract should include the terms and conditions of the warranty. The manufacturer's warranty should be a separate, written document. The contract must also include: the contractor's name, address and home improvement license number; the approximate starting and finishing dates; and a description of the work to be done and materials to be used.
- State law prohibits home improvement contractors from collecting more than one-third of the contract amount as a deposit. If the contract is signed in your home, the contract must allow the consumer three days in which to cancel the contract. Under emergency situations only, the consumer may waive this three-day right to cancel, but must sign a special form to do so.
- Check the contractors' complaint records with the Office of Consumer Protection at 240-777-3636 or online at <http://montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer> and the Better Business Bureau at 202-393-8000 or online at [www.dc.bbb.org](http://www.dc.bbb.org), and with the MHIC and DNR.

OCP, the County's consumer protection agency, investigates thousands of complaints each year involving automotive sales and repairs, new home purchases, home improvements, credit issues, retail sales, internet services and most other consumer transactions. OCP provides pre-purchase information to consumers, as well as speakers to the community on consumer issues.

For more information, call 240-777-3636 or visit OCP's website at <http://montgomerycountymd.gov/consumer>.

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